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ABSTRACT

This brief essay argues that the best way to improve student achievement is to increase parental teaching of children prior to school entry. The essay is accompanied by an annotated bibliography summarizing 14 empirical studies which document a significant positive relationship between parental teaching and student achievement. It is contended that it is well known that the skills children bring to school are far more important than anything that happens to them in school. The explanation for social class differences in achievement is that the experiences of children from high socioeconomic status (SES) homes are more like the educational experiences in the school than are those of low SES children. These achievement differences can be countered by changing the home experiences. The three most effective manipulable variables influencing achievement are (1) time on task, (2) student/teacher ratio and (3) motivation. Although there are limits on how much can be done about these variables in school, they can readily be maximized in the home, which again argues for parental instruction. Findings of the 14 studies cited suggest that the essential role of parents in the education of their children must be recognized and that steps must be taken to encourage parental teaching. More than one-half of the essay consists of an annotated bibliography of the 14 studies cited. (Author/BH)

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PARENTAL TEACHING: HAS THE PANACEA BEEN RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES?

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We've know for years that what children bring to school is far more important than anything that happens to them once they get there. No phenomenon in education has received more extensive documentation and yet oddly none has really been more systematically ignored.

True our Jensens and our Burts have formulated their elitist explanations, our social critics their polemics, our activists their programs, our educators their excuses, our researchers their studies, yet this universally recognized phenomenon's genesis has been ignored by just about everybody.

Certainly our hereditarians have the best excuse. They can simply argue that what children bring to school is genetically determined hence nothing can legally or morally be done about the situation. The second best excuse belongs to our activists who have at least thrown money at the problem even though they may agree with their critics that they are in effect trying to drain the ocean with a teaspoon.

The rest of us have very little excuse. We have sadly shaken our heads, lamented the injustice of it all, and gone about business as usual. We have in effect operated exactly like the geneticists by simply expousing socially

deterministic philosophies rather than biological ones. We know that the reason some children learn so much more quickly than others resides in differential stimuli occurring within the home, but what we ask can we do about that? Some parents just won't expose their children to classical music, take them to the ballet, or recite Shakespeare and only a fool would try to make them. It follows therefore that all we can do as critics is rail against the courseness of such people (or of society which made them so), that all we can do as teachers is try to help their "disadvantaged" offspring catch up once they come to school, and that all we can do as researchers is to statistically control for SES or race in our studies.

Alas would that our culpability were so slight, our options so simple. If only we could forget that everything we know about education points to the fact that the experiences which higher SES children receive before coming to school which help them most once they get there are probably those experiences most like the ones they receive in school. Education is a most inexact science it is true, but there are laws and one of them is that transfer, when it occurs, occurs most readily when the antecedent stimuli or experience is most similar to its criterion. It is therefore not the trip to the ballet which is most likely to help a child learn to read once he starts school, it is teaching him to read before he starts school which is most likely to help him to read once he gets there. Short of that, teaching him his letters and reading to him will help him more than a sonata.

Isn't it interesting that as educators we learn in our reading methods courses that one of the best predictors of subsequent reading achievement is whether or not a child arrives at school knowing the letter names, yet we

don't learn anything about the efficacy of encouraging parents to teach their children the letter names? Even worse we have actually discouraged parents from teaching by warning, without one shred of evidence, that it could be physically, emotionally, and socially harmful to children.

As researchers we are equally culpable. After tens of thousands of studies and uncounted millions of dollars we know of only three manipulatable variables which can influence the amount a child learns in school: (1) time on task, (2) class size, and (3) motivation. As ridiculous as it sounds, nothing else works. The more we teach a child the more he learns; the more individual attention we can give him the more he learns; the more motivated he is the more he learns.

The truth is, however, that the only three things we know about increasing learning in the schooling paradigm are not applied because (1) there are just so many hours in the day for instruction and most of them are being used, (2) we can't afford to decrease class size for financial reasons, and (3) we just don't know how to motivate many children. Hence the damning silence which always occurs when a layman asks us to "Name one research finding which has resulted in a widespread increase in the amount school children learn."

There is no reason for this state of affairs to persist. All we need is widespread recognition of the facts that the thing that some children bring to school which automatically insures their success is what their parents teach them and that the three principles of increased learning which cannot be applied to school instruction for pragmatic reasons are automatically present in the parental teaching paradigm: (1) a child taught at home obviously receives more instruction than a child not taught at home; (2) a child taught

one-to-one by a parent, or possibly by both parents at the same time, is receiving instruction in the smallest class size yet invented; (3) a child taught by his parents is naturally instilled (motivated) with the importance of learning.

Therein resides the basic theoretical rationale for parental teaching. Its empirical rationale is even more impressive. Of the 14 empirical studies which we were able to locate specifically dealing with the link between parental teaching and student achievement, all 14 documented a significant positive relationship between the two variables. Where else in educational research could such unanimity be found? It is true that not all 14 studies (which are individually annotated in Appendix A) are that well done (only three utilize true experimental designs, the rest are quasi-experimental), yet 14 for 14 is an impressive statistic in and of itself, especially given the fact that the relationship in question has such firm theoretical underpinnings.

Obviously we should have been encouraging parents to teach their children all along, both before they begin school and after they get there as well. We cannot turn back the clock, however. All we can do today is recognize the essential role of parents in the education of their children and bend over backwards to both encourage them to teach their children and to show them how to do so.

We have no choice. Violence and drug abuse are rampant in the schools, test scores have declined, and many children are graduating from our high schools functionally illiterate. As educators we must reach out to parents and as partners work together to improve this sorry state of affairs.

It is truly disheartening that out of over 500 AERA paper sessions, only three are even tangentially related to parental instruction. There are indications that things are beginning to change however. Bumper stickers and television ads abound telling parents to read to their children; organizations such as the IRA have organized active committees devoted to encouraging parental involvement in education; the very existence of this audience this afternoon. These things are a beginning, but the issue is too important, the stakes too high for us to complacently leave this room and forget about the entire affair. To do so would be analogous to Alexander Fleming flushing his pesky mold down the drain!

APPENDIX A

Parental Teaching: Annotated Bibliography

The following annotated bibliography consists of the 14 studies which we have been able to locate so far dealing specifically with the relationship between parental instruction of their children (including reading to them) and the subsequent achievement of those children. Although many other studies exist involving attitudes of parents as the dependent variable rather than achievement, characteristics of early versus non-early readers, and descriptions of the home environments of early readers and gifted children, we have chosen to exclusively concentrate on the direct link between parental teaching and student achievement.

Brzeinski, J.E., & Driscoll, H.N. Early start in reading-help or hindrance? In C.G. Smith (Ed.), Parents and Reading. Newark, De.: International Reading Association, 1971.

The study investigated (1) whether preschool children could learn basic reading skills, (2) whether their parents would learn and use techniques to teach them, and (3) whether one mode of parent-training presentation would result in greater achievement than another. Two experimental groups, one in which parents were trained via educational television, the other in which they were trained in small groups using kinescopes of the T.V. lessons, were compared to a control group of parents not encouraged to teach their children. The skills to be taught consisted of (1) calling to mind the next word in a sentence, (2) listening for initial consonant sounds, (3) letter forms and names, (4) letter-sound associations for certain consonants, (5) guessing a word given its initial sound, and (6) guessing a word which was written given its initial sound.

The results clearly indicated that given some training parents could successfully teach their children beginning reading skills provided the children had a mental age of at least four and a half. One parent training technique was not found superior to the other, and children from both experimental groups who had practiced the skills more than thiry minutes

per week showed statistically significant gains in achievement. The amount a child learned was directly related to the amount of time someone practiced beginning reading activities with him (with thirty minutes per week apparently being the minimum effective time).

Reading to the child was also found to be effective for children both in the instructional group as well as in the control group. Of the children who did not receive instruction, those who were read to by their parents had higher test scores than those who had not been read to. Of all the Ss, the ones with the highest test scores had been taught more than thirty minutes per week and read to more than sixty minutes per week.

Champagne, D.W., & Goldman, R.M. Development of a training program to increase the use of reinforcement in informal teaching by mothers of educationally disadvantaged children. San Diego, Calif.: Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, 1970. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. ED 047 034)

A program was designed and implemented to teach mothers of educationally disadvantaged children to increase their use of positive verbal reinforcement while working with their children. Seven parents were worked with individually in their homes over a 15 week period using a variety of techniques involving modeling and role play. Parents were asked to work with their children 10 minutes per day and to tape the interaction. Each week's tape was rated by the investigators to evaluate changes in the parents use of positive reinforcement. Results for each parent were calculated in percentages on the basis of the 1st day's tape and the final tape and were compared to normative results for middle class parents obtained at the beginning of the study (using a very small n). Average percentage results for the parents as a group compared favorably to those of the middle class parents. The data supported the following assumptions:

(1) "Parents can acquire skills in using reinforcers."
(2) "Parents who have infrequently interacted with their children on a regular basis using school tasks, want to have teaching as one of their roles."
(3) "Parents will welcome educators to their homes if the 'contract' is clear, that is, specific skills are offered and the educator does not intrude nor comment on the rest of the life style, or value system of the parents."

Della-Piana, G., Stahmann, R.F., & Allen, J.E. The influence of parental attitudes and child-parent interaction upon remedial reading progress. (Report No. CRP s - 266 - 1). Salt Lake City, Utah: Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, 1966. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. ED 012 689)

An investigation of the effect of a parent training program in which behavior modification principles and their application to improving children's overall behavior in the home (as well as school-related behaviors) and its relationship to reading achievement of remedial readers was studied.

Forty students in grades 3 to 6 with reading achievements one year or more below grade level agreed to participate in a reading improvement program

which consisted of one parent attending a specially designed training program. Students were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (control Ss received the program later in the year following completion of the experiment).

Experimental parents attended group training sessions and received at least two home visits in which parent-child interaction was observed. The purpose of these sessions was to improve problem areas at home, including homework behaviors and reading through parent-child tutoring sessions. Recommendations and strategies for reading were individualized to each child's needs and school program.

Using a pretest-posttest control group design experimental Ss gained significantly more than controls on both oral reading and comprehension.

Dix, M. Are reading habits of parents related to reading performance of their children? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of English, Chicago, November, 1976. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 133 693)

A survey conducted to determine whether differences in parents' reading habits and attitudes correspond to differences in their children's reading achievement levels. Questionnaires were sent to all parents of the STARR Reading Project students (i.e. who had reading levels lagging one year or more below ability). Of the 213 sent, 148 responded and were then divided into two groups: those (98) with children who had gained 1.5 grade levels or more in reading during the previous year and those (58) who had gained less during the same period.

Results suggested that parents of the "better" readers had good reading habits themselves, valued a wide background of experience as benefiting reading, and defined reading as a process much broader than the decoding of words. These parents also tended to have read to their children before they started to school.

Durkin, D. Children who read early. New York: Teachers College Press, 1966.

Results of two longitudinal studies of children who learned to read prior to school are reported. The first, conducted in California from 1958 to 1964 examined 49 children who were quite heterogeneous with respect to sex, SES, and race. All had been read to regularly as children and all had had questions about reading answered for them by a parent or older sibling (although only 11 Ss had been deliberately taught to read). Ss who had received help in reading at age three or before were ahead of those whose help began at age five although as a group all were still scoring significantly higher on reading achievement tests than would have been predicted based on I.Q. after three years in school.

The second study was conducted in New York using a much more homogeneous population. Thirty early readers were compared to 30 matched controls over a three year period. Early readers retained their initial reading advantage over the entire period. Major differences between attitudes toward parental

teaching was observed between the two groups with the non-early readers' parents expressing greater reluctance to both engage in direct instruction and to answer questions about reading.

The major findings from the two studies can be summarized as follows:

(1) Early reading instruction does not have a detrimental effect on the reading achievement or attitudes of children during the elementary years.
(2) Early readers tend to remain ahead of non-early readers during the elementary school years, especially the brightest early readers.
(3) The age at which reading help is first administered may affect achievement differentially.
(4) Early readers were helped by a parent, sibling, or combination, who read to them and discussed and answered questions they had about pictures and words.
(5) Early reading does not appear to be related to sex, SES, or I.Q.
(6) Early readers tend to have parents who feel that help in reading is desirable or at least not harmful to future school adjustment.

Heron, T.E., & Axelrod, S. Effectiveness of feedback to mothers concerning their children's word recognition performance. Reading Improvement, 1976, 13, 74 - 81.

An investigation of the effect of verbal reinforcement administered to parents via telephone concerning their children's word recognition performance. Three inner city black children (two fifth grade girls and a fourth grade boy) who attended a resource room for four months were selected for study.

Two of the Ss' mothers were home fulltime while one worked parttime. The children were pretested each day on ten words and given the list to take home to learn. In addition they were posttested on the previous day's list. The mothers were telephoned each day and praised for their children's performance on the previous day's list and encouraged to help the Ss learn the new list that night. Progress was charted via a multiple baseline design for two Ss and a reversal design for the third.

Two Ss scores increased by four to five words while one S (the one whose mother worked parttime after school hours) showed no change in scores at any time. The author concluded that the telephoning technique, although vulnerable to environmental variables in the home, can be an effective teaching strategy with some children for word recognition.

Lincoln, E.A., Briscoe,L.W., & Williams, D.K. Parents make a difference in urban schools. The Arithmetic Teacher, 1975, 22, 460 - 463.

Eleven urban fourth grade children were selected according to the criteria of (1) being at least one grade equivalent behind in arithmetic, and (2) having at least one parent educated at the 10th grade level or beyond willing to participate in a six week project designed to increase their children's computation skills.

The program consisted of two sessions per week in which the parent sat beside his/her child as the experimenter explained concepts and illustrated

them with problems and seatwork. The parent became involved only when asked for help. Homework problems were also sent home and parents were asked to encourage completion, offering help when needed.

Pre- and posttests were constructed based upon the materials covered in the sessions and administered before and after the program. Significant changes were observed at the .01 level.

McManus, A. The Denver prereading project conducted by WENH-TV. The Reading Teacher, 1964, 18, 22-26.

"Preparing Your Child for Reading" an educational series presented through television programs and written guides, was tested in New Hampshire prior to its release nationwide in order to evaluate its effectiveness. Interested families were solicited through a media advertising campaign and of the more than 1600 responding, 150 preschool children living within the television reception area were selected for the experimental group and 150 living outside the reception area were selected for the control group. Both groups represented children four and one-half through six years of age; some attended nursury schools and kindergarten while others were not yet in school.

During a sixteen week period television programs were aired once a week and two group meetings were held during which lectures on reading were given and parents' questions addressed. Control parents received no instruction and were not directed to teach their children. All children were pre and posttested on a standardized beginning reading test and were administered a group intelligence test prior to the onset of the study. All parents filled out questionnaires before the program and those who received instruction were surveyed after the program's completion as well.

Results indicated that the gains of the experimental group were markedly superior to the gains of the control group. Questionnaires randomly sampled revealed a positive response from those parents and children who followed the program.

Murray, B.B. Individualized amelioration of learning disability through parent helper-pupil involvement. Final Report. Clarksville, Tenn.: Austin Peay State University, 1972. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 068 497)

An investigation of whether active participation of parents trained as their children's tutors would result in greater gains in reading achievement. The parents of 26 second graders experiencing reading problems in the public schools and an army-dependent school in the South volunteered to participate. Both lower and middle class parents were represented. Fourteen Ss were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 12 were assigned to the control.

In a comprehensive two-week training program parents were taught diagnosis, personality, and learning theories and reading methodology. They were also given demonstrations of children being taught reading using these techniques.

Parents then actually taught their children during twelve one-hour sessions supervised by a professional who demonstrated, guided, and acted as a resource. Experimental Ss failed to register significant gains on a

standardized achievement test, but demonstrated significantly greater gains on an oral reading inventory than controls.

Niedermeyer, F.C. Parents teach kindergarten reading at home. The Elementary School Journal, 1970, 71, 438-445.

An investigation of the effect of parent-monitored practice using programmed materials sent home regularly with the children of parents who had attended a 90 minute workshop. Sixty-eight children from a suburban school whose parents responded to the invitation to attend the workshop were used as the experimental group. Two comparison groups were established from two different area schools: one being comprised of kindergarten children of parents who responded favorably to a letter asking them if they would participate in such a program were it in existence - the other of a random sample of all kindergarten pupils in a school in which no parent contacts had been made. The non-participating pupils in the experimental school constituted a third comparison group.

An achievement test served as the pretest and a sampling of the material from the experimental program as a posttest. Participating parents were sent a questionnaire about the program at its completion. Results indicated a significant treatment effect for the experimental Ss.

Rich, D. The relationship of the Home Learning Lab Technique to first grade achievement. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Catholic University, 1976.

The effect of sending home game-like activities in reading and math on the achievement of first grade children over a sixteen week period was studied. Two hundred eighteen children representing inner city and suburban areas were randomly selected from the population of Catholic schools in a metropolitan area. Ss were randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions.

Experimental Ss took home short activities every other week which were designed to reinforce skills taught in school. Letters also accompanied the materials, but no personal contacts were initiated by the school. Pre and posttesting indicated significantly greater gains in reading for the experimental students, although the treatment effect was not statistically significant with respect to math gains. A post hoc analysis indicated that race interacted with the treatment with intra-treatment gains for black students being proportionally greater than those occurring in predominantly white classes.

Smith, M.B. School and home: focus on achievement. In A.H. Passow (Ed.), Developing programs for the educationally disadvantaged. New York: Teachers College Press, 1968.

The effect of a parental support program on the reading achievement of elementary school children from low SES, inner city families was studied. Second and fifth graders in two elementary schools constituted the experimental groups and those in a third "matched" school served as the control.

Parents of experimental Ss were instructed through group meetings at school to establish routines at home that would demonstrate esteem for learning and facilitate homework completion. Among other things parents were asked to (1) read to their children, (2) read in the presence of their children, (3) ask questions about and praise their children's work, and (4) ensure a quiet place for homework completion at the same time each day.

Experimental Ss registered significantly greater gains in reading vocabulary over the five month period than their control counterparts. Comprehension gains were not consistent. A survey of parents revealed overwhelmingly favorable attitudes toward the program.

Wise, J.H. Parent participation reading clinic - a research-demonstration project. Washington, D.C.: Children's Hospital of the District of Columbia, 1972. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 072 174)

In a project designed to increase reading achievement in inner city children, parents were involved in the ongoing instruction of their elementary schoolage remedial readers. Nineteen volunteer parents and their children aged seven through twelve formed the experimental group. A control group was made up of volunteer parents whose children could be matched to the experimental group on classroom teacher and reading test scores. A reading specialist worked with each parent and child on a weekly basis and sent them home with an educational prescription calling for up to thirty minutes of instruction daily. All Ss were pre- and posttested. After eight months statistically significant differences in mean grade equivalency gains favoring the home instructed children were found on both the vocabulary and comprehension subtests of a reading achievement test. Of additional tests administered only to the experimental Ss after six months, achievement and reading tests revealed significant within-group mean gain scores while an oral vocabulary test did not. Although attrition accounted for a 45% decrease in the size of the experimental group, data tend to support the efficacy of this home-based instructional model.